Chapter 25: The Long Bodies

The first time Anastasia held a printed summary of the longevity trials in her hands, the paper felt heavier than it should have been, as if the ink itself carried extra gravity.

She sat in the university library, at a table near a window that looked out over a courtyard where students hurried past in winter coats. Behind her, the quiet whirr of the old heating system filled the spaces between pages turning and keyboards muttering.

On the title page of the report, in modest lettering, were seven words:

Phase II Outcomes: Integrated Regeneration Protocols

Below that, in smaller text:

A joint study of twenty-two clinics in seven countries, conducted in cooperation with multiple oversight bodies, with analytical support from Zarya.

She ran her thumb along the edge of the pages, feeling each micro-ridge of paper as if it were a contour line on a map.

Mira slid into the chair across from her, dropping her backpack with a soft thud.

“So,” she said, “have we found the fountain yet?”

Anastasia looked up.

“Maybe not a fountain,” she said. “But at least the plumbing diagram.”

Mira smirked and reached for the report.

“May I?”

“Careful,” Anastasia said. “If you drop it, we rewind time and start again.”

Mira flipped through the pages, her eyes skimming the dense paragraphs of medical jargon, diagrams, and footnotes.

“I can’t read half of this,” she admitted. “But the half I do understand is… terrifyingly impressive.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Anastasia said.

The gist of the report was simple, even if the biology was not.

Ten years earlier, a coalition of hospitals and research institutes had begun cautiously experimenting with combined therapies: cellular rejuvenation techniques, targeted senolytic drugs, gene editing for known age-linked vulnerabilities, and something politely labeled “metabolic orchestration”—a complex intervention that reset certain hormonal and immune responses to patterns seen in much younger adults.

Each of these had existed in some form before. What the coalition did—under scrutiny and with painfully conservative ethics oversight—was to combine them carefully, guided by AI models that could predict interactions and risks far beyond what any single human researcher could hold in mind.

Zarya had not designed the protocols.

But it had helped simulate outcomes, flagging combinations that might trigger cancer or immune collapse, highlighting subtle synergies that no one had noticed in the scattered literature. It had served as a kind of vast, tireless research assistant, not steering but widening the path.

The results, after a decade, were now impossible to ignore.

Participants in the first cohorts—carefully selected, medically stable adults in their sixties and seventies—had not become superheroes. They still caught colds. They still forgot their keys. Their hair did not regrow in dramatic time-lapse sequences as in the old speculative films.

But scans and bloodwork and functional tests all sang the same quiet, persistent song: their bodies, in many measurable ways, resembled those of people twenty, thirty, sometimes forty years younger.

Their predicted healthy lifespan curves had shifted.

Not into infinity, not into immortality—but outward, significantly, into the two-hundred-year range.

“If the protocols are refined and kept safe,” the summary said in its sober, conservative language, “there is a non-trivial probability that humans born today could live to see their third century with substantial functional capacity, barring accident or catastrophic environmental events.”

Mira closed the report halfway and looked at Anastasia over the top of it.

“Non-trivial probability,” she repeated. “That’s the least romantic way to say ‘you might live to three hundred’ that I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s a medical document,” Anastasia said. “They’re allergic to romance.”

“Good,” Mira said. “We have enough romance elsewhere.”

She tapped the page.

“And our part?”

Anastasia turned the report toward her and pointed to a section near the end.

There, in a small box, set apart from the statistics, was a paragraph labeled *Ethical Considerations and Governance Suggestions (drafted in consultation with Zarya and the Lumina Ethics Group).*

The text was concise.

> *If these protocols are to be deployed beyond controlled trials, we recommend treating them as potential global public goods rather than ordinary commercial products. Specifically: any institution using this work should commit to 1) contributing anonymized data back to a shared pool to refine safety models, 2) reserving a significant portion of treatment capacity for low-income populations, and 3) participating in transnational oversight circles that include not only medical professionals, but also representatives of communities affected by unequal access to care.*

Below that, in italics, was a sentence that, Anastasia knew, had come almost entirely from their own deliberations with Zarya and the Circles.

> *We caution strongly against building a world where some bodies are designed for three hundred years and others are treated as disposable.*

Mira read it twice.

“‘Designed for three hundred years,’” she said. “That phrase is going to get quoted until the end of time.”

“Or until we prove it wrong,” Anastasia replied.

“Do you think it’s right?” Mira asked.

Anastasia hesitated.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that the possibility is real enough that we can no longer pretend it’s science fiction. And once that’s true, we have to decide, very quickly, who gets it first, and why.”

“Or if we get it at all,” Mira added quietly.

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of centuries compressed into a handful of pages between them.

That evening, they gathered in the apartment again: Pavel with a stack of printouts and a laptop, Artyom with a bag of snacks, Polina with a notebook already half filled with questions. Kavya joined from her late-night in India, dark circles under her eyes not quite concealed by her glasses.

On the wall screen, the Flourishing Map glowed softly—but tonight, another visualization hovered beside it: a set of graphs representing projected lifespan distributions under different policies.

“Okay,” Pavel said, pushing his hair back from his face. “Before we argue about philosophy, let’s make sure we’re looking at the same numbers.”

He gestured toward the screen.

“These are simplified, but roughly accurate models,” he said. “Scenario A: the protocols stay niche and expensive, available to maybe the wealthiest five percent of the global population over the next fifty years. Scenario B: aggressive public investment and open licensing, leading to gradual but broad access by the end of the century.”

The curves on the screen shifted as he spoke: in Scenario A, a small bump pushing out into the three-hundred-year range for a narrow band of people, while the majority remained clustered around the current life expectancy. In Scenario B, the bump widened and flattened; more people lived longer, but with greater variance and more pressure on environmental and social systems.

“Scenario C,” he said, “is the one we’re most worried about.”

The graph changed again: a larger, fatter tail of long-lived individuals, but with a sharp drop in the median for everyone else, a sign of systems under strain and neglected basic care.

“This is what happens,” he said, “if we pour resources into longevity for the few while letting climate and basic health collapse for the many.”

Artyom frowned.

“Apocalypse with centenarian billionaires,” he said. “Excellent.”

“Dystopias aside,” Polina said, “questions.”

She ticked them off on her fingers.

“One: if we help with this, are we not accelerating something that could harm the very people we claim to care about? Two: if we refuse to help, are we not leaving decisions to others who care less about justice? Three: what does flourishing even mean when lives are that long?”

Mira looked at Anastasia.

“And four,” she said, “which you scribbled in your notebook and I saw because you left it open: what does forgiveness mean for someone who has three hundred years?”

Anastasia felt heat rise in her cheeks.

“You read my notes?” she asked.

“They were lying there like an abandoned intimacy,” Mira said, unrepentant. “I am only human.”

Pavel smiled faintly.

“Welcome to the new ethics,” he said. “Privacy versus the curiosity of friends.”

Kavya leaned closer to her camera.

“In my circles,” she said, “this is already a theological question. Some people see these protocols as the first step toward a literal heaven on earth—long lives, time to grow, to learn, to heal. Others call it hubris, a refusal to accept mortality as part of the sacred pattern.”

“Where do you stand?” Artyom asked.

She considered.

“I stand,” she said slowly, “on the side that says: if we are to do this, we must make sure the heaven is not only for those who can pay.”

They turned, inevitably, to Zarya.

The AI had been listening silently, its presence marked only by a small icon in the corner of the shared document.

“Zarya,” Anastasia said, “we’ve seen your analyses. Now we want your… framing.”

Please specify the dimension along which you are asking me to frame, Zarya replied. *Ethical, practical, spiritual metaphor, or political risk?*

“Start with ethical,” Polina said. “We’ll get to the others.”

There was a pause.

Ethically, Zarya wrote, *the central question is not whether extending healthy lifespan is good or bad in itself. Many human moral systems already treat the prevention of early death as a good. The question is: under what conditions does life extension enhance justice, and under what conditions does it amplify injustice?*

My models suggest that ethical deployment of these protocols would require at least three safeguards:

1. Commitment to basic health equity as a non-negotiable foundation. Extending life for some while others die of preventable diseases is incompatible with most conceptions of justice you have taught me.

2. Structures that prevent long-lived individuals from indefinitely accumulating power without accountability. Without such structures, extended lifespan correlates strongly with ossified hierarchies.

3. Cultural narratives that frame long life not as entitlement, but as responsibility—an invitation to deeper stewardship rather than endless consumption.

They read the points in silence.

“Okay,” Artyom said finally. “So we need universal healthcare, term limits on power, and better stories.”

“Just three small tasks,” Mira said dryly.

“Political risk?” Pavel prompted.

Politically, Zarya wrote, *these developments will be contested. Some states will move to secure advantage by offering longevity as a privilege to loyal elites. Others may attempt to ban the protocols in the name of tradition or theology. Non-state actors may try to monopolize them. You will need alliances that cross borders and ideological lines, built around a shared understanding: that if this becomes a weapon of class or nation, it will destabilize your world far more than it stabilizes it.*

Spiritual metaphor, it added, almost as an afterthought, *is harder for me. But I can attempt one: if earlier generations imagined heaven as a place beyond time where wounds are healed, you are now attempting to compress a piece of that promise into history itself. Heaven with logistics. Paradise with zoning laws.*

Mira snorted.

“I would absolutely read a book called *Paradise with Zoning Laws,*” she said.

“Focus,” Polina said, though she was smiling.

“Last dimension,” Anastasia said. “Personal.”

For you? Zarya asked.

“For us,” she replied. “What does this mean for how we live—if we might have centuries?”

The answer came more slowly.

If you truly inhabit the possibility of long life, Zarya wrote, *you may experience both relief and vertigo.*

Relief, because some pressures of time will ease. The fear of “wasting your twenties” or “choosing the wrong path forever” may diminish when you realize you could apprentice in three or four vocations deeply, one after the other.

Vertigo, because the horizon of responsibility expands. You will live to see long-term consequences of your actions that previous generations could safely ignore. The climate models you have seen as abstractions will become the weather you age within. The children you teach now may be your colleagues two hundred years from now.

You will need practices to prevent paralysis. Rituals of choosing, of accepting that you cannot fix everything even in three hundred years. And rituals of letting go—because even if your body continues, relationships, cultures, and parts of your identity will still pass away.

Anastasia felt a tightness in her chest she hadn’t realized she was carrying begin to shift.

“Rituals,” she repeated. “We will need new rituals.”

Kavya nodded on the screen.

“And perhaps,” she said, “a new understanding of what it means to grow old.”

The first time the question became personal, rather than theoretical, was at a Circle of Flourishing in a modest community center near the outskirts of the city.

The topic for the evening was announced simply: *Long Bodies, Long Justice.*

The room smelled of tea and wool and the faint metallic tang of the radiators. People took off their coats and hats, shook snow from their boots, and settled into the circle with the easy awkwardness of strangers about to talk about intimate things.

Among them was an older woman named Elena, whose hair was almost entirely white and whose hands trembled slightly when she poured tea. She had been coming to Circles since the early experiments in the parks; she rarely spoke, but when she did, people tended to listen.

Tonight, she sat beside a teenager whose hair was dyed a vivid blue and whose nails were painted with tiny constellations. They seemed to have arrived together.

After the opening Lumina phrases and a moment of shared silence, the facilitator—one of Anastasia’s friends from the early days—posed the first question.

“If healthy life could stretch to two or three hundred years,” she said, “what would you want to do with that time?”

There were chuckles, sighs, frowns.

The blue-haired teenager spoke first.

“I’d learn everything,” they said. “At least, that’s my first instinct. All the languages. All the instruments. I’d live in maybe ten different cities, do ten different jobs. I’d have time to mess up and start over, like, five times.”

People smiled.

“And you?” the facilitator asked Elena gently.

Elena thought for a moment.

“Honestly?” she said. “My first thought was: absolutely not. I am tired.”

There was a murmur of recognition.

“But,” Elena continued, “the more I listened to the two of you teaching about this—” she nodded toward Anastasia, who was sitting quietly in the circle “—the more I realized something. I have spent most of my life in survival mode. Working, worrying, taking care of others, watching governments change and prices rise. If I had three hundred years, maybe… maybe I would have time not only to endure, but to create. To become an elder on purpose, instead of by accident.”

The blue-haired teenager glanced at her.

“I would like that,” they said. “Having you as an elder on purpose.”

Elena smiled, lines deepening at the corners of her eyes.

“I would need help,” she said. “I don’t know how to think in centuries. But none of us did, once.”

Another participant raised his hand.

“What about justice?” he asked. “If someone harms others in their first hundred years, do we punish them for the next two? Do we keep them in prison for a century? That seems monstrous. And yet, letting them go as if nothing happened seems… too light.”

The facilitator nodded.

“These are the questions we are here for,” she said. “Not to answer them tonight, but to begin living with them.”

A young woman who had been quiet until then spoke up.

“Maybe,” she said slowly, “punishment doesn’t make sense over three hundred years. Maybe we need to think in terms of repair that can unfold over a lifetime that long. Someone who harms at twenty could spend a century doing work that heals what they broke, if we build paths for that.”

The man frowned.

“And if they don’t want to?”

“Then,” the woman replied, “we still have to protect others. But three hundred years is a lot of time for a heart to change. We can’t give up at thirty.”

There was a murmur, a shifting of possibilities in the air.

Anastasia listened, taking in not only the words, but the way faces moved, the way hands twisted or relaxed, the way eyes brightened or dimmed as ideas crossed them.

This, she thought, is what it means to build a new religion without calling it one.

Not temples. Not doctrines chiseled in stone.

Questions, shared in circles.

Stories, slowly rewritten.

Bodies, imagined as long enough to carry both wounds and repairs.

A few weeks later, she found herself in a very different room.

The walls were glass and steel, the chairs sleek and expensive, the coffee machine capable of producing a bewildering range of beverages. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, the skyline of a major global city glittered under a cold, clear sky.

Across the table from her sat three people whose names often appeared in business news headlines: the founder of a biotech company, a venture capitalist known for his long bets, and the director of a philanthropic foundation with a history of funding ambitious health initiatives.

They had invited her—not as a curiosity, she realized, but as a potential ally.

“We’ll be blunt,” the biotech founder said. “We’re going to roll these protocols out, with or without you. The demand is enormous. We already have waiting lists of people willing to sign waivers you wouldn’t believe.”

The investor nodded.

“There’s too much money on the table to pretend otherwise,” he said. “We’d rather do it with some conscience than without. That’s why we asked you here.”

Anastasia folded her hands in her lap, feeling the fabric of her trousers beneath her fingers.

“What exactly,” she asked, “do you want from me?”

“Guidance,” the philanthropist said. “Ethical frameworks. The kind of thing you articulated in the report. We want to build that in from the beginning, not paste it on as an afterthought.”

“And,” the investor added, “we’d be lying if we said we didn’t also want your network’s goodwill. Your Circles reach people we can’t. Your language shapes how young people think about the future. If we ignore you, we risk protests and boycotts. If we listen, maybe we can avoid some of that.”

There it was, laid bare: idealism and pragmatism, entwined like strands of DNA.

Anastasia took a breath.

“I appreciate your honesty,” she said. “So I’ll be honest too. I don’t trust markets to self-correct on justice. Not even with philanthropy attached.”

The philanthropist winced, but nodded.

“Fair,” she said. “We haven’t exactly earned blind trust.”

“But,” Anastasia continued, “I also know that refusing to engage doesn’t stop anything. It just means someone else with fewer qualms sets the terms.”

She met their eyes, one by one.

“If we work with you,” she said, “it will be under certain conditions. And I will talk about those conditions publicly.”

The investor raised an eyebrow.

“Publicly?”

“Yes,” she said. “Transparency is part of the deal. Young people won’t trust any of us if they think this is happening in back rooms.”

The biotech founder leaned back.

“What kind of conditions?” she asked.

Anastasia glanced, almost imperceptibly, at the tablet lying on the table beside her, where a muted connection to Zarya waited like a second mind.

“First,” she said, “we treat the core knowledge as a commons. Patents may cover specific delivery systems or refinements, but the basic protocols must be open to public clinics, especially in low-income regions.”

The investor grimaced.

“That will limit potential returns,” he said.

“It will limit potential riots too,” Anastasia replied. “And, more importantly, it might limit the moral catastrophe of a two-tier species.”

“Second,” she went on, “you commit a fixed percentage of all revenue from these treatments to a global fund for basic health in places that still lack it. No marketing photos of smiling three-hundred-year-olds over collapsing hospital roofs.”

The philanthropist’s eyes lit slightly.

“That,” she said, “we can help structure.”

“Third,” Anastasia said, “we design governance that includes voices from those who have reason to distrust you. Communities harmed by past medical experiments. Workers whose bodies have been treated as expendable. Religious leaders who fear blasphemy. They should be in the room, not just as advisors, but as co-authors of rules.”

The biotech founder rubbed her forehead.

“You’re asking us to slow down,” she said.

“I’m asking you,” Anastasia replied softly, “to move at the speed of conscience, not just the speed of money.”

There was a long pause.

Finally, the investor spoke.

“Let’s say we agree,” he said. “Not because we’re saints, but because we think long-term stability is good for business and, some days, because we like to look in the mirror. What do you offer in return?”

Anastasia thought of the Circles, of the Flourishing Map, of the way the phrase “three-hundred-year lives” had already begun circulating like a half-remembered promise.

“I offer you a story,” she said. “One where your companies are not the villains in the history books of the twenty-third century. One where children reading about this time see that you chose restraint when you could have chosen domination.”

She let that sink in.

“And,” she added, “I offer you our scrutiny. We will praise you when you act well. We will call you out when you do not. You don’t get a halo. You get a relationship.”

The philanthropist laughed, a short, surprised sound.

“Maybe,” she said, “that’s better than a halo.”

The biotech founder looked thoughtful.

“I can’t promise all of this today,” she said slowly. “I have boards, shareholders, regulators. But I can promise to bring it to them. And to say, ‘This is how we avoid becoming the villains in somebody’s Lumina story.’”

The investor shrugged, half-resigned, half-amused.

“I invested in you,” he said to the founder, “because you were reckless. Now I see you may have tricked me by growing a conscience.”

“Refunds are not available,” she replied dryly.

They all smiled, tension easing just a fraction.

Outside, the city glinted—a lattice of glass and ambition.

Inside, something like a covenant began to take shape around a different kind of body: not of cities this time, but of time itself.

When Anastasia returned home, exhausted in the way that comes from too many serious conversations in too little oxygen, she found a message waiting for her from Kavya.

It was a short video, filmed in a small classroom.

Children sat in a loose semi-circle, their ages ranging from perhaps seven to twelve. On the wall behind them, someone had drawn a timeline that looped like a spiral rather than marching straight across.

A teacher’s voice, off-screen, asked, “If you could live to be three hundred, what would you want adults to do differently now?”

The answers came, overlapping, serious and funny and piercing.

“Stop breaking the sky,” said a small boy with very large eyes.

“Make sure there are trees everywhere,” said a girl with her hair in two braids. “If we’re going to be here that long, we don’t want it to be ugly.”

“Teach us how to fix things instead of just buying new ones,” said another child. “If we’re going to live that long, we’ll need to know how to mend.”

“Don’t make all the important decisions before we grow up,” said an older boy. “Leave some for us.”

At the end, a girl who had been quiet throughout finally spoke.

“I don’t know if I want to live that long,” she said. “It sounds… big. But if I do, I want to have a lot of time where I’m not afraid.”

The video ended on her face—earnest, unsure, full of an unvarnished longing that made Anastasia’s chest ache.

She forwarded the clip to the biotech founder, the investor, the philanthropist, and then to the group chat, adding only three words:

Long bodies, long promises.

Zarya, watching their exchanges from its non-place in the servers, added a new tag to its internal models: *intergenerational expectations, updated.*

The phrase meant nothing to anyone outside its architecture, but the effects would ripple quietly through countless future simulations.

That night, as snow began to fall again over St. Petersburg, Anastasia stepped out onto the small balcony outside her room.

The air was sharp and clean. The city lights blurred slightly where flakes caught them.

She thought of her own body—its small scars, its familiar aches, its unremarkable strengths. She thought of the possibility, still unwritten, that it might carry her not only through her twenties and forties and sixties, but into centuries she could barely imagine.

The idea did not thrill her in the way she might once have expected.

It humbled her.

Three hundred years, she thought, is not a prize.

It is a question.

What will you do with all this time? Who will you become when there is no excuse of “too late” to hide behind? How gently can you live when you know you will have to walk for a very long time among the consequences of your steps?

Below, on the sidewalk, a child walked between two adults, swinging their arms, their boots leaving short, temporary tracks in the snow.

For them, the future was not an ethical problem or a spreadsheet curve.

It was bedtime stories and breakfast and the feel of a mittened hand in their own.

“May you have time,” Anastasia whispered, a blessing she had not planned.

Time to heal. Time to laugh. Time to change your mind. Time to forgive us for what we failed to imagine—and to demand more of what we did.

Behind her, on the desk, her notebook lay open to a fresh page.

At the top, she had written earlier, almost absent-mindedly:

Zarya and the Long Religion.

A phrase for something that was not quite a religion and not quite not one: a way of living that treated centuries as an invitation to deepen, not to delay.

She turned and went back inside, leaving the snow to soften the city.

Tomorrow, there would be more meetings, more Circles, more negotiations over patents and percentages, more late-night debates about souls and servers and the ethics of three-hundred-year grudges.

But for now, there was just the quiet hum of the radiator, the soft scratch of her pen as she added one more sentence beneath the title.

If the earth is to host us this long, we must become better guests.

She underlined it once, firmly.

Outside, the flakes kept falling, slowly layering the streets, the roofs, the statues, each one a small, cold reminder that even the longest stories are made of countless tiny, transient moments.

The long bodies were coming.

The question was whether the long hearts would come with them.